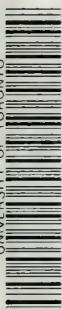


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Totem lore

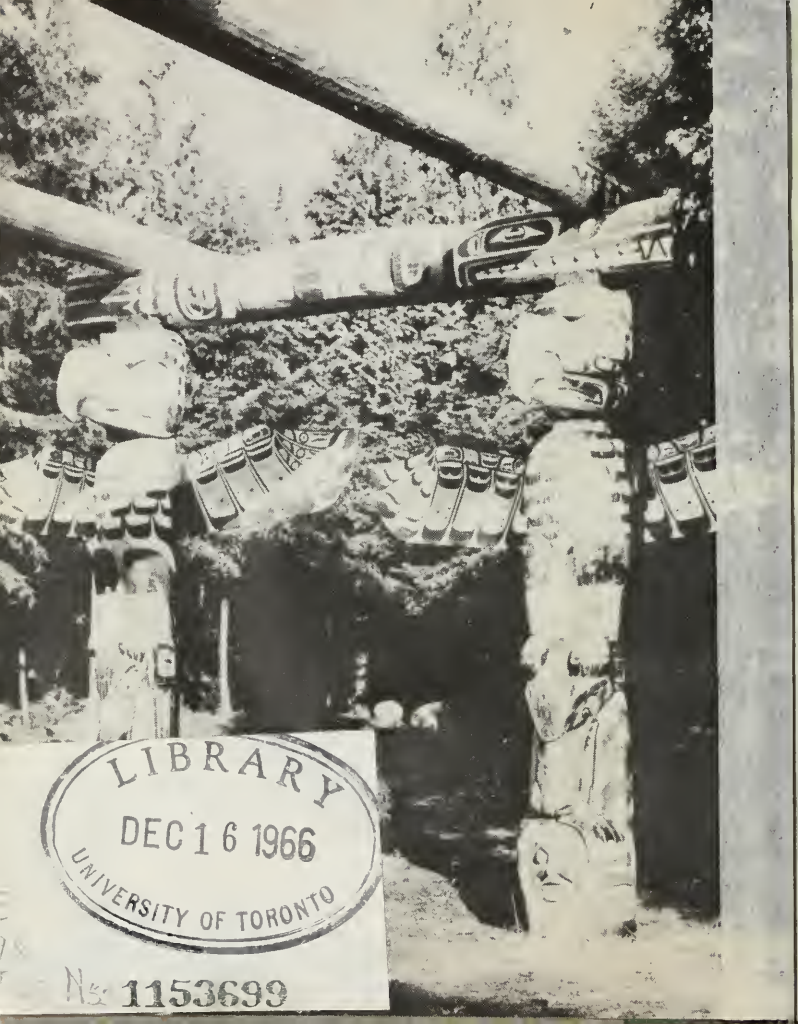
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TOTEM LORE

By W. Nicholson



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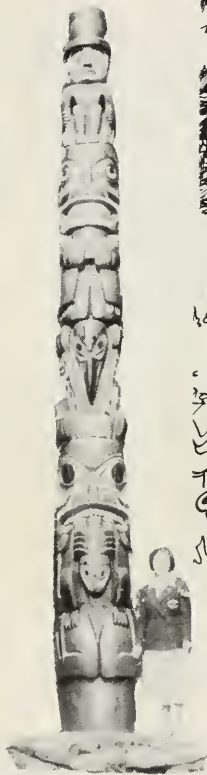
A

TRAVELLER seeking lore in an isolated native village, discovered an ancient Indian prostrated and grovelling in the earth before a large totem. Impressed by this apparent display of piety, he waited until the old man arose and asked: "You talk with ancestors about here-after?" "Ugh!" grunted the ancient one, "me no talk, me fish .. Here after worms!"

Shocking as this reply may have been to the traveller, it disclosed to some extent the feelings of the old Indian towards the totem-pole. Obviously, he had no fear of it, nor can he have attributed any particular sanctity to the ground on which it stood. Totems received the respect due to the chief or spirit they represented, but, as far as we know, were not worshipped as idols.

There are several types of Totems, of which, House-poles and Memorial-poles were the most common. These were erected to carry tribal emblems, mark historic events, and commemorate departed chieftans; as we today, with similar sentiments in mind, fly national flags, build triumphal arches, and set up statues to worthy civic dignitaries.

The House-Pole proclaimed the social standing of a family. It was often attached to the front of the house. An egg-shaped opening cut in the base, just large enough to admit one person at a time, served as the main entrance.



MEMORIAL POSTS



MORTUARY POSTS



INTERIOR HOUSE POSTS

House-posts were used to support the cross-beams of the chief's lodge. When celebrating guests became too rowdy, the house posts were covered with blankets as the Indians believed the sight of the rowdyism might offend the Totem spirits.

The Memorial-Pole served as a monument to a departed chief, and marked the ascendancy of his successor.

The Mortuary-Post was both a memorial and tomb. It had a cavity in the top, wherein rested the body or ashes of a chieftan.

Generally, the groups of carvings on a Totem were family crests. These crests were inherited, gained by conquest, or occasionally as payment for services. The more crests, the greater the prestige of the family or chief who displayed them; consequently, the titles were very jealously guarded.

The figures composing the crests were derived from history and folklore. They represented birds, animals, and spirits. Figures half-human and half-animal represented spirits capable of appearing in either form. Most tribes had a story wherein a remote ancestor encountered a spirit; and after a series of hair-raising adventures, won or received the right to use it as the badge of his family.

Occasionally the figures on Totems represented connected narratives; but, as they were understood by a select few—perhaps by the owners alone, they must be regarded as impressionist illustrations rather than picture writings.

A child can read a story he knows by looking at the pictures. A totem is read in much the same manner. It is necessary to know the story beforehand. Diagrams of a few of the commonly used crests appear on page 6 and 7.

THUNDERBIRD

(Tataach)



A mythological bird who was the creator and contraller of all elements and spirits.

When he flew, the flapping of his wings caused the thunder and the flashing of his eyes, the lightning.

His diet consisted of killer whales and his abode was in the highest mauntains.

RAVEN
(Yelth or
Hoayah)



One of the most prominent figures of the Haidas, Nootka and Tsimisyans.

He is credited with giving the light, fire and water to the Indians; he had the power to change at will to animal forms or to that of a human being. The Raven can be recognized by his long beak.

Sometimes he is seen on Totems wearing a chief's ringed hat, the rings denoting accomplishments of the dead chief.



BEAR
(Chet-woot)

Symbol of great strength, authority and nobility. Used by most mainland tribes.

WHALE



(Eh-halie)

Black fish and whales were much dreaded, as the Indians believed they would purposely attack the canoes of the coast tribes, often capsizing them and drowning the occupants. Some tribes depicted the whale as a symbol of great strength and bravery, but due to the havoc it caused amongst the coast tribes, it was also used as a symbol of evil.

EAGLE
(Chak-chak)

Symbol of great wisdom, authority and power, one of the principal crests of the Haidos, Tsimshyan, and Kwakiutls.



FROG
(Shwah-kuh)

When strangers approached, the croaking of the frog would serve as a warning. Thus the frog was taken as a guardian symbol.



SALMON
(Walalee)

Symbol of abundance.

GOAT

Crest used chiefly by the mountain people.

Symbol of kindness.



TWO HEADED SNAKE
(Sisiutl)

Mythical monster used as house front design. It imparted power to those using this symbol as a crest.



The erection of a Totem was occasion for a Potlach—feast of great rejoicing and giving of lavish presents. When a prospective chief gave a Potlach, his family and even remote relations were obliged to muster all their resources, as their future esteem and social standing depended on the display of wealth and generosity with which their relative was launched on his career.

Making a Totem might take from six months to a year—ample time to arrange a lavish erection ceremony and allow the good news to reach most distant tribes.



A suitable cedar was felled, then hollowed out on one side; this lightened it for transportation and, to a certain extent, prevented 'checks' (vertical splits) from marring the finished work. The log was then hauled, often a considerable distance, to a spot near its appointed site.

All this was slow and expensive work, which according to the universal laws of 'living up with the Joneses' had to be farmed out to members of a neighbouring tribe, who never failed to charge plenty for their services. Often, at this stage, as with many other ambitious schemes, capital gave out, and the log might lie for months awaiting sufficient money to make a down payment on the carving contract.

Totem carvers were skilled craftsmen; and, as their work shows, sincere students of nature. They were thoroughly versed in the official if unwritten rules concerning measurements of totems and use of heraldic devices. Professional knowledge of this sort was expensive and demanded careful accounting. Many totems bear tally marks on their backs showing the number of blankets due to the carvers as they progressed with their work. A small pole might cost as much as three hundred blankets.



The Totem completed, guests assembled from near and far for the Potlach and dedication ceremony, not to mention the free handout they knew would be given by the newly appointed chief and his family.

The ceremonies opened with a memorial service to the late chief. This was called "The Drying of Tears". It was short and to the point, and once dispensed with, the real program began in earnest.

Next came the raising of the Totem-Pole.

A hole was dug in the ground. The chief, to show his magnanimity, his devil-may-care-darn-the-expense generosity, would have his favourite slave killed and thrown into it. This bit of sportsmanship placed the chief high in the esteem of every one present, with the probable exception of the poor slave!

Braves now lined themselves along each side of the pole and lifted it bodily until its base was over the hole. Ropes of cedar bark were attached to the head. A roller was placed underneath and worked along until the pole rested at an angle of about thirty degrees.

At a given signal the braves gave a mighty shove and a mighty shout. The other guests took the strain on the ropes. Amid wild cheering and halooing the Totem swung upwards, its base settling on the body of the poor slave, who, as you can see, bore the brunt of the whole business. Later, under white-man's-law, the slave's part was omitted from the ceremony!

The Totem, raised for all the world to see and admire, the program took a festive turn. An intoxicating drink called 'Soopolallie' was produced. This was very potent, and was taken with great gusto. Made from berries, it looked and tasted like soap-suds.

Now the guests, full of good spirits, received lavish gifts from their hosts. The quantity of these gifts was oftimes determined only by the amount a squaw could

carry. "Little Woman" was a term frowned upon by the Indian braves, as the more muscle a squaw possessed, the better her husband fared at a Potlach.

The Potlach reached its grand climax when the chief, to attain the ultimate in showmanship and generosity, gave away his wife. Probably he had been awaiting the chance for years; nevertheless, the deed was done in an off-hand, think-nothing-of-it-manner. The chief was fairly sure of his ground, for Potlach etiquette decreed that all gifts, even nagging wives, be thankfully accepted.



The medicine-man was master of ceremonies. Under his direction mythological legends and heroic episodes from the tribes' history were enacted.

Festivities continued for weeks, sometimes for months. Everyone had a wonderful time; and though the cost of it all might leave the chief and his family without a blanket to their name, it had a certain investment value; as cus-

tom decreed that Potlach favours be returned with interest.

Eventually the party wore itself out. The guests shouldered their gifts and departed vowing that they had never seen anything like it before. And, in spite of empty treasure chests and dry soopolallie jars, the chief and his family were happiest of all . . . they had their totem! There it stood, a glorious monument to the late chief whose timely death had brought all this good fortune, a proclamation to the world that a new chief reigned in his stead, and a wonderful reminder of a wonderful party.





This little booklet in no way assumes authority on the deep and equivocal study of Totemism. The writer, who has escorted numerous visitors along the waterways of British Columbia, aims to do no more than supply a light answer to the inevitable light question. What is a Totem-Pole?

Interpretation of Totemic art will have, always, an element of speculation and controversy; for the Indian had no written language, and the original message of a Totem-Pole may have been intelligible to its artists or owners alone.

Excellent books await the reader who would pursue the subject seriously. In them he will find a wealth of delightful stories; and he will see how the Indian, in his own way, pondered and solved for himself the mysteries of life.

To Tutooch and all the Totem Spirits we defer; and humbly beg forgiveness if we have misused their magic names and symbols.

Today, when everything must be 'debunked,' explained, or analysed, the Totem Spirits, like the fairies and leprechauns, reveal themselves only to children and a few wise old men. But, Tutooch and his kindred are still in office; they were there in the beginning, they will be there to the very end. Away in the mountain tops, in the skies, in the depths of the sea—far beyond dull proof and definition—they maintain their kingdoms, ever ready to serve as buffer states between us and the hard reality of the world.

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